

Chapter One. Forward!

‘...A very good place to start’

Cultural geography, like any discipline, evolves over time. Its provocations and pursuits change with respect to fresh theoretical impetus, as well as reacting in response to a changing world. In the relatively short timeframe since the second edition of *Understanding Cultural Geography: Places and Traces* (2015) the world has changed - perhaps quite significantly. There are ‘new normals’ emerging in every aspect of our cultural life. Our assumptions and orthodoxies are changing with respect to non-human nature (as a consequence of virus pandemics, the rise of student-led climate change protests, and the increasing frequency of extreme weather, fires, and pollution); with respect to racial equality (due to the rise of neo-fascist far-right groups across Europe and America); with respect to gender (due in no small part to the establishment of the #metoo movement); with respect to sexuality (due to the widespread recognition of fluid and non-binary orientations in some places, and the rise in hate crimes in others); with respect to the nation (following the re-ordering of global relations, for example between the US and Korea, Russia, and China, and between the UK and Europe); with respect to the power of corporations (following the new and far-reaching influence of social media giants); and with respect to mobility (which cross-cut the issues noted above, as well as the significant changes experienced in the border debates between US and Mexico, into and through the European Union, and into Australia). In recent years, everything we thought we knew about the cultural world is now up for debate. A defining feature of *Understanding Cultural Geography: Places and Traces* has been to position its readers as part of this cultural world, and as our world changes, this new edition offers insight into their nature, and how best to engage with them.

This third edition of *Understanding Cultural Geography: Places and Traces* seeks to engage directly with the changing cultural context of our time. To this end, it consolidates and strengthens its focus on *places* and *traces* – arguing that a focus on geography gives material and metaphorical grounding to the key ideas of culture and affinity that come to define us; it also focuses on the notion of *(b)ordering* – the idea that through our cultural traces we seek to *culturally order* and *geographically border* the places of which we are apart.

But before we go further, let's just pause and reflect for a moment. We stated above that the world has changed, perhaps quite significantly, since the second edition of this book; but to what extent is this claim true? Has the whole world changed, or just parts of it, for some people, in some places? When we critically look at the contexts we have listed above, it is clear that some subjects and selves have been re-ordered with respect to others in the 'new normal' of our time. For these issues, many peoples' relative positions to power, to risk, and to the margins have changed, perhaps quite substantively. Yet if you are a black woman in a western nation (to take just one example), perhaps the views and actions of the misogynist, populist, and racist right-wing are something you have been sensitive to since the day you were born (or at least since you first became self-aware). From this identity position, or for anyone who shares an affinity with it, perhaps not much has really changed in recent years – it's a case of same sh*t, different day: forward! This point reminds us that we need to be sensitive to our positionality, and the cultures we have affinities with, whenever we are making claims about the world. We should re-check our cultural privileges, and re-insert (or indeed remove) them, in new ways. If we do so, we may re-frame the claims about the significance of changes we are currently witnessing in the cultural world. We could instead frame them as substantive changes to the cultures that are vulnerable, at risk, and subject to conflict. Where once particular cultures felt they enjoyed privilege or equity, they may now

feel under threat and marginalised. Where some cultures felt they were the recipients of punches ‘down’ from the dominant, they may now be the new power brokers, ‘punching across’ to more established, but weakened, authority. Whatever our position in relation to these changes, it is clear that in recent years our cultural lines have been redrawn, and in some cases, made bolder. Maybe these changes have grabbed our attention because we do not find the new punchlines funny anymore. It is the premise of this book that cultural geography offers a clear and insightful way to analyse, engage with, and critique these new (b)orders.

Taking care: conflict and conviviality.

As it does so, this book uses theoretical ideas to change our understanding of the world. Any theoretical idea helps us to scaffold and construct our framing of reality: their words make our worlds. As we pause to reflect on our own positionality in relation to the contemporary situation, we should also pause to reflect on the palette of theoretical ideas that are most useful to critique, and (re)construct the worlds of which we are a part.

It is with this point in mind that this third edition of *Understanding Cultural Geography* argues that cultural geographers must be care-ful (see also Dorling, 2019). We must employ theoretical ideas that do not simply draw our attention to risks and threat, but also those that highlight the ways in which cultures forge complementarity and co-existence. What languages best enable us to engage with choreographies of conflict *and* conviviality?

In employing theoretical vocabularies that remains rooted in ‘modern’ binaries (see Box 1.1) this book suggests that cultural geographers not only have a brilliant means through which to understand the conflict that appears to be the dominant process (b)ordering our world, but we also run the risk of suggesting that conflict is the only way of comprehending and conducting

our lives. Despite many scholars seeking to destabilise these modern binaries, their powerful legacy sometimes means that we are hot-wired for focusing on conflict – and to some extent this is understandable given its visibility and prevalence in the contemporary era. However, in doing so, we may pay less attention to the cosmopolitanism and compatibility that marks many aspects of cultural life. If we look away for a moment from the spectacular, the headlining making, and the clickbait, we may also see the extraordinary ordinary, the everyday co-existence and conviviality which emerges and comes to define our places. In short, we must engage with this diversity of practices, in both the changing margins and mainstream, and connect theoretical insights that understand all these mainstays of our life. We must be wary that our discipline does not become the contemporary equivalent of its forebears and, through elevating conflict, function as a ‘weapon’ of and for the status quo. If the discipline can take and make a place for all approaches this is an important statement in and of itself; as well as becoming a provisional medley from which we can all choose the most appropriate strokes with which to swim through the cultural world.

Box 1.1. Dealing with modern binaries, their legacy, and contemporary culture wars...

If words make worlds, then the words we use to theorise the world are of primary importance. Indeed, even deciding what ‘things’ get words, where one ‘thing’ ends and another begins, are seismically significant. Ask yourself: what is that object? Is it actually an ‘object’, or a ‘process’? How does it relate to another one (or many)? How are they different? Is ‘one’ more valuable, better, or worse, in comparison to the others? On what criteria, and who gets to choose? As we will see in this book, the words we use to name ‘things’ matter – the power to name (after Jordan and Weedon, 1995, see Chapter Six) not only helps us to understand

the world, but also renders it real – the world effectively becomes the meanings that we give to it, and words are one mechanism to order and border our lives.

“One means by which we impose order is by deploying binaries of various kinds. They enable us to sleep at night, to have the modernist dream ... binaries are the dream” (Barnes, 2005: 76).

“Sadly the American dream is dead, but if I get elected president I will bring it back... Bigger, better and stronger than ever before” (Donald Trump, when running successfully for election to the US presidency, in Neate, 2015).

As Barnes suggests above, one key way in which words have been harnessed to order the world is through the ‘deploy[ment of] binaries’ (please note, this use of military metaphor is also not without meaning). The deployment of binary classifications has led to the messy complexity of life, death, and everything (else) having order imposed upon it using an ‘either-or’ categorisation. Olsson explains that this filing of the world is premised on the assumption that “nothing can be one thing and its opposite at the same time” (1980, 36b, also in Cloke and Johnston, 2005: 9). From the get-go then, this categorisation of the components of the chaotic world are filed into one of only two pigeon holes; every-thing must other be either ‘one thing’ (for example ‘A’), or the ‘other’ (‘not-A’). This system suggests, therefore, that ‘one thing’ cannot be anything other than what it has been classified as (in other words, ‘A’ cannot be two things at once (i.e. it cannot be both ‘A’ and ‘not-A’). This system demands that no middle ground exists between classifications – all categorisations are clear and stark; in this binary version of the world, there is only one ‘thing’ or its ‘other’, there is no in-between.

'Everyone is a Roundy or a Squarey' (after Hargreaves, 1975).

This binary classification system has dominated western thinking and practice for centuries. As Barnes tells us, it has been the 'dream' that has enabled the world as we know it to develop, to live, and to sleep at night, and, as we have also seen, some power brokers not only wish to perpetuate this classification, but strengthen it (see Neate, above). We will interrogate the implications of this situation throughout this book, but at this point I wish to raise the effects this categorisation has had for how we relate to the world, and to the vast array of 'others' we share it with.

If, in the binary version of the world, everything has to be one thing or the other, then this categorical imperative also demands that you, me, and everyone else in it, need to pick a side. We have to be a 'Roundy' or a 'Squarey'. Inherent to the binary classification is the creation of an 'us' and a 'not-us', in other words, an 'us' and 'them'. As a consequence, it requires us to position ourselves as part of one culture, and identify those what are not-us, or 'Other' (see Said, 1979). We are required to do this whether we identify with the given classifications or not (for example, what if I wanted to be an octogon, rather than a Roundy?, or even break apart the 2-dimensional orthodoxy and choose to be a dodecahedron?). Can you position yourself in this binary world, with respect to all the cultural ideas and practices with which you have affinity; which side are you on? Are you with 'us' or against 'us'? How does this framing influence how you see the world? Are you always and absolutely a Roundy or a Squarey?

One of the attractions of applying such rigid categories is their reductive simplicity. A simpler world is one that human cultures can deal with and create policies for, a place where one can act in authoritative ways, and where expertise is democratised. Yet, in some cases an either-or categorisation system does not begin to exhaust the possibilities that comprise our, and everything else's, identity positions. Concomitantly, this classification system can also act to reduce the possibilities on offer for openly engaging with these apparent 'others'. In sum, through simplifying the world, the modernist dream has re-placed it with a version where conflict between 'us' and 'them' has become normal and routine; in contemporary times binary classifications have been deployed to reduce the relations between cultures to nothing but war.

Figure 1.1 Culture wars all about the place.



(created by Hannah Salisbury)

As many scholars have argued, the problem when applying binary categories to (b)order the world is the tendency to produce, “dogma and intolerance, and sometimes much worse” (Barnes, 2005: 72). This categorisation, as we have seen in the above examples, has the effect of ‘normalising’ a way of approaching the world that is founded on an ‘us versus them’ mentality, in this view: life is war, and culture is inevitably conflictual. This modernist dream has not only influenced many politicians, but also many human geographers - despite a groundswell of non- and a-modern thinking in recent decades (see, for example, Deleuze, 1985, 1993; Callon, 1986; Rouse, 1996; Latour, 1999; Doel, 1999 Murdoch, 2006); as Cloke and Johnston state,

“binary thinking is [still] widespread in human geography and remains a persistent and powerful force in the shaping of landscapes of understanding” (2005: 11).

So, is this binary categorisation the best way to name, (b)order, and render the world real? Is culture inevitably conflictual, or can it be co-existing? Can we be more-than-one ‘thing’ at any one time? Can we create and occupy the middle ground? Can life not only be military, but also based on mutuality?

This new edition of Understanding Cultural Geography extends its focus on the fragmentation and proliferation of cultural views and actions to using words that draw attention the multiple worlds which we experience. By using theoretical ideas that are influenced not only by binary classifications, but also ideas of assemblage, emergence, affect, and performance, it is hoped the reader can understand the actor-centred multiplicities that have come to define our cultural geographies and our actions within them.

At the end of this beginning, I want to ask you one final question. As we lie awake through the dark hours of our changing times, imagining modernist dreams and nightmares, what would happen if we approached the world differently? What would happen if an axiom of geography was *not* just that “people generate prejudice; [and] prejudice governs place” (after Watson, 1983: 388), but also that ‘people generate reflexivity, and affinity governs place? Perhaps we may find that some prejudice is inevitable, that some lines must never be crossed, and therefore strongly defended. But perhaps we can also conduct the act of geography by critically thinking through what worlds it is possible to create afresh *together*: we relate, therefore we are.